

Compliance with physical therapy referrals: How many patients who are referred to PT for low back pain actually utilize the service?

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Introduction: Low back pain (LBP) is commonly encountered in the primary care setting and physical therapy (PT) is one of the most useful management tools [1]. PT decreases overall healthcare costs by decreasing the need for advanced imaging, additional visits and opioid medications [2,3] and improves outcomes for patients with both, acute and chronic LBP [3,4]. Studies have shown that about one in eight patients do not use their referrals to specialists [5]. This study aims to investigate patient compliance with PT for the management of LBP following referral by the primary care provider and to identify possible barriers to PT utilization.

Methods: A retrospective chart review was conducted using the electronic medical record (EMR). A total of 50 patients diagnosed with LBP who were referred to PT during the period between April 2019 and June 2019, were randomly selected. The data was collected and analyzed using Excel statistical functions. The study was approved by the Rutgers Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Results: Appointments for PT were made by 22% (95% confidence interval [CI]: 10, 34) of the individuals sampled, but only 2% (95% CI: 0, 5.92) went to all appointments. The age representation ranged from 28 to 82 years old, with the mean age 52.9. Of those sampled, 60% (95% CI: 46.2, 73.7) had hypertension, 22% (95% CI: 10.4, 33.6) had diabetes mellitus and 0.2% (95% CI: 9.2, 32.2) had both. Interestingly, only 2% of the sample had health insurance. The most cited reasons for non-compliance include lack of insurance and previous negative experience with PT.

Discussion: Utilization of PT for LBP by patients referred from the ACC is very low regardless of age group. Prior experience with PT and insurance status appear to be the most frequent barriers. Further research is necessary to identify techniques to improve compliance.

References:

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